Pinch Point

#8

Against the Stream

By Charlotte Joyner

Taking a drag of his cigarette before he goes up to perform for the eighteenth time this year, I can't help but wonder where the world sees him. Leaning against the wall of The Cranker, filled with a hundred somebodies who currently feel like nobodies. Or is it nobodies who want to become somebodies? That's the real question we're all forced to ask at this daunting period of our twenties. And it's funny, because I — an outsider among this scene of musicians that fill Adelaide pubs and clubs — am also so connected to their world. Their bands, with unique sounds and messages, are all trying to become something in the world. Yet their relentless drive to create feels at odds with the 21st-century global streaming economy, where music seems simultaneously everywhere and nowhere.

I also have creative ambitions. But not of the performance type. I live, dreaming of the literary world—writing novel after novel that inspires films and plays and television shows. A world limitless by genre or by age. But I still share this same desire as my musical peers: to be seen by the outer world. Music, though, feels so much more accessible. To perform, free of cost. To record at home and share songs with the world. To build a base. Yet this same accessibility creates an overwhelming tension between the desire to be heard beyond Adelaide's intimate scene, and the challenge to stand out as a unique artist within the saturated landscape of music streaming platforms.

I asked Jack where he saw music in his future — what path this would take him on in the next ten, twenty and thirty years. And he didn't know. The obvious answer from any early twenties adult when asked about their future. But it also felt so true to the scene that he, like all other surrounding Adelaide musicians, find themselves in. Because he so perfectly captures this paradox within his musical career. For him, performance was always

an inevitable future. He began learning guitar at 10-years-old, with performance swiftly following him as a means of expression and emotional escape. However, now his sense of self is becoming more defined through his music and performance, even as he begins to perform as a different character for his listeners.

“It’s about feeling what someone else is feeling,” he told me. And that is the power he tries to replicate in each of his works. From his group jazz performances with Calling Leo, to his more indie and experimental releases with Day for Caroline, Velvet Void, and Bat Country, each song that Jack releases gives his listeners a chance to experience visceral emotion through raw, musical intensity.

"It never feels forced. If there’s ever a point where there’s nothing I want to make then I just won’t make it. But I think that would take a big identity shift.”

However, to make music today isn’t just a question of identity, but rather, is about an artist’s ability to navigate the tension between art and commerce. Like so many artists, Jack also

battles with the double-edged sword of modern music production.

“It’s so much easier now compared to thirty years ago,” Jack stated. “Anyone can learn the skills and put something out there. But when you release the music, it’s like dropping something into a much larger sea.”

Streaming platforms have provided all artists with the chance to be heard. However, they’ve also created a overly-competitive market where growth and recognition feels near impossible. And while recognising this challenge — “to sell a bit of yourself if you want to make money*”,* he admits — Jack continues to refute totally compromising his musical virtues for a bigger name. “It’s hard, but if you can do it while keeping it about the music, then that’s something to admire.”

Comparatively, Sofia — an Adelaide based folk artist with sounds echoing the works of Phoebe Bridgers and Delaney Bailey — also wrestles with this tension as she grows to a wider audience. For her, performance offers a uniquely rare chance to meet new people and form authentic shared experiences.

“It’s different every time. Even on tour, with all its highs and lows, each moment felt special.”

Like Jack, she grew up immersed in music, making this future much more a destiny than a choice. Working purely on her solo performances, she has grown rapidly in the past year, performing at WOMAD as she builds her own name. Yet, her more prominent dreams for a national, or even international name, leave her challenged by the Adelaide scene.

“The scene is so connected, but sometimes it feels too connected in a bad way. Gigs are often just friends supporting friends, which makes it hard to grow when bigger opportunities feel so out of reach.”

And it's this stifling appearance that, for artists like Sofia who have a vision for a greater musical future, find that the life of a 9-5, and their desired "musical career', feels more like a balancing act that leaves growth beyond Adelaide more distant as the days pass.

Yet, Sofia and Jack aren't the only artists in Adelaide struggling with this longing for more. And much of this falls to the contemporary world's shift from tangible music to digital consumption, with this isolating listening experience profoundly changing today's relationship between creators and audiences. In today's streaming-dominated world, music has no longer become bound by geography, often feeling more anonymous and commodified. And this leaves artists like Jack and Sofia struggling to maintain a sense of connection and authenticity as they try to connect with an economy that prioritises volume over intimacy.

Adelaide's music scene is contrarily fascinating, collectively opposing this global dynamic. And like many other growing musicians within this city, Jack and Sofia have each recognised this city's unique sense of community.

"Adelaide's a great place to start, Jack said. Anyone can get a gig here. And while people

critique it, there's plenty of inspiration in the city. While the scene is smaller than other places, there's a huge chunk of really artistically minded people who are driven to create."

What makes Adelaide's music scene so special, is its emphasis on listening with intention. Unlike the constant, faceless consumption fostered by streaming platforms, Adelaide continues to foster a culture of personal connection. Performances aren't solely about showcasing talent; they are a time for shared experience that linger long after the music ends. And this ethos to resist global streaming's transactional approach to music transposes the heart of this city back to a time where creativity isn't just background noise, but a focal point of everyone's identity.

Watching Jack perform at The Cranker, I am struck by the raw energy that fills the room. The audience — a mix of both familiar faces and curious strangers — isn't here for curated algorithms or playlists. They're here for Jack. To be struck by his raw performance. They hear the music he and his friends create together, and live in that moment, with him. With everyone in that room. And for Sofia as a solo artist, performing live is equally as profound.

"It's a chance to be really in the moment with people," she reflects. "That's something you can't replicate online."

However, my understanding of a global stage beyond Adelaide's music scene changed after my conversation with Vic Flierl, of the record store Mr V Music in Semaphore, who has lived through the decades of Adelaide's music scene.

"I've played in bands since high school in the seventies; I began working at record stores in the eighties and have been doing that ever since. I've played in other people's bands, started, my own, and now run a small label to release music by local acts I like."

Growing up in Adelaide's music scene, Vic feels that its significance within Australian music

is undeniable. And while being a smaller capital of Australia, Adelaide gives artists an opportunity to develop their identity before falling among a greater sea of competition.

*"*It's hard to tell when you're involved in it on a day-to-day basis whether what you're doing is trivial or the greatest thing in the world. Either way, it doesn't matter — it should be done. Obviously there's a problem in the 'food chain' — the money getting to the people it belongs to. But there's also the positive that people have access to everything. You don't need a lot of money to follow an artistic passion."

This pragmatic optimism from a local artist who has lived through decades of musical change feels comforting against the anxieties of younger artists like Jack and Sofia. They feel the barriers of online consumption, whereas Vic recognises its inevitability in musical evolution. His early days of music production weren't supported by these tools.

"I don't think having all the modern ways of recording help to make records as good as what someone my age would call the heyday, which is the sixties and seventies. But that's just an old guy talking, you know. If you were born a bit later you'd say that The Pixies and Nirvana were the heyday, and if you're younger again, you'd have someone I don't even know about, so I get all that."

However, access doesn't guarantee recognition, because just as Jack and Sofia have experienced first-hand, releasing a track in today's music economy is like shouting into the void — "there's just so much out there."

This concept of a "musical void" is a growing fear for many young musicians as online consumption grows. But Adelaide's scene is uniquely different. Musicians stand together within a tightly-knit community that emphasises the meaningful connections created by music, ultimately offering a blueprint for resisting the anonymity of the global streaming economy. It's a city where music still feels personal, allowing listeners to attach faces to the

songs they love. And while the broader world may disagree, there is something deeply admirable about a contemporary city that is able to prioritise human bond over algorithmic consumption. This camaraderie is something Vic, now working with his record label and observing new talents, feels resonates a connection just as he experienced in bands during the eighties.

“I do sense that the younger bands have a really good camaraderie among themselves, and I do believe that when I was playing back in the eighties, there was a similar thing there, because you share band members, band practice rooms and backstage — all the good things.”

Every musician in Adelaide reminds us that creativity is as much about the journey as it is the destination. Because music was made for connection, not profit, and performance is a means of building that relationship between the performer and their audience.

“Things change as far as venues and playing live,” says Vic. “I don’t worry too much about that. I don’t go with the view that people say there’s nowhere to play anymore — that’s ridiculous. You can play in your backyard, in the driveway, in your local scout hall or church hall, you can find a place to play. And if people want to hear you, they’ll come along and hear you.”

This ethos — a belief of music as form of connection rather than commercial success —is central to Vic’s worldview. “

No one owes anyone a living from music and I think that’s a good thing, because music should be made whether you’re earning a living from it or not. Even if you work an eight hour day and go home and play music for two hours, I think that’s as valid — perhaps even more so — than someone who’s decided that he’s going to get up at 9 am and write a song. I think that’s more arduous and artificial.”

Hearing the lived experiences of decades prior, I find natural parallels to the struggles and triumphs of today's artists like Jack and Sofia. Both have a deep commitment to their craft, navigating challenges of modern production and a desire for the larger stage. Through Jack's jazz collaborations and experimental projects, he continues to embody the freedom of music that Vic champions from his early days in music, while Sofia's intimate performances naturally echo the value of connection that Vic, like many Adelaideans, hold dear.

"Everyone should pursue music to the extent that they want without stressing much about fame. People find their own spot, and as long as they can, the music is always going to be more important than the sales."

Thinking about this landscape as I stare at the cigarette in my hand, watching the ash fall to the ground, it seems profound to witness an artistic scene that has the power to transcend its global circumstances. Despite the constraints of modern production and the limitations of streaming platforms, new artists like Jack and Sofia continue to push boundaries, challenge norms, and inspire their listeners, just as Vic and his fellow musicians did decades before. Their resilience is a testament to the enduring power of art to connect, even in a world that can feel so disconnected.

As Vic says, "You don't need millions of fans; you just need the right ones."

In a world dominated by algorithms and instant gratification, this sentiment feels revolutionary. It's a reminder that art, at its core, is about connection—a community built not by numbers but by shared experience and understanding. And perhaps, in today's racing musical economy, that is Adelaide's greatest gift.

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